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ABSTRACT

This monograph reviews pertinent research and issues concerning grade retention in an effort to understand the implications for retention and promotion policies, especially in elementary schools. The monograph discusses 11 topics, including: (1) the historical context of retention and promotion; (2) the link between grade retention and dropouts; (3) the number of students retained and their characteristics; (4) financial costs of grade retention; (5) court decisions concerning retention and promotion; (6) analysis of research that indicates disadvantages or advantages of elementary grade retention; (7) methodological problems which cast doubt on most research findings; (8) transition classes as an alternative to retention; (9) dropout and higher education retention literature; (10) implications for policymakers; and (11) reasons that retention practices persist. A list of 63 references is included. (RJC)

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TWICE IN ONE GRADE = A FALSE SOLUTION

A Review of the Pedagogical Practice of Grade Retention in Elementary Schools: What Do We Know? Should the Practice Continue?

By Patricia Maslin Ostrowski

November 1, 1987

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

Each September about 3,000,000 five, six and seven year old children cross the threshold into America's education system. For many it's the beginning of an escalator-like ride up the academic blueprint toward graduation. Every June, however, far too many find themselves in a revolving door situation as they land right back where they started in September. These are the grade repeaters, the children at risk of becoming school casualties.

Grade retention, often euphemistically called "a year to grow", "a gift of time", is less politely known as flunking, holding back, repeating, retardation and nonpromotion. It is simply the pedagogical practice of requiring a student to spend a second year in the grade she or he has just completed or, perhaps more accurately, passed through. Advocates state that it improves poor academic progress and enhances the development of socially immature students. Critics claim it is no better academically and sometimes worse than promotion while, in some cases, contributes to negative social consequences.

No one would argue that schools should allow students to glide through the system without learning, especially those children missing the basic literacy and numeracy skills. Yet there is widespread disagreement over how to cope with the problem of inadequate mastery of grade level requirements. Thus one finds a range of school policies and retention models to handle the child deemed unready to pass on to the next grade according to schedule. If grade retention provided an answer for America's failing students, then I would herald the practice. The reality, however, is that holding students back is a false solution.

The purpose of this monograph, then, is to review the pertinent research and analyze the issues of grade retention in an effort to understand the implications for school retention/promotion policies. While I believe that educators consider nonpromotion a serious matter, I am concerned that many school officals make retention decisions without first carefully studying the research literature. The practice has been around for so long that dedicated professionals and parents alike may not question its value and explore alternatives. Therefore this monograph will trace the major research findings, for example the relationship between grade retention and dropouts, which should be considered by districts when forming or reforming their policies.

If we rethink our current lockstep system of grade levels and rigid achievement standards, it is conceivable that we would create alternative solutions for not only the retention dilemma but the dropout and illiteracy problems as well. We must focus on what is best for the children, not what works for the educational system.

HOW TO USE THIS MONOGRAPH:

This monograph is a resource for school administrators and board members who must make policy decisions, for teachers who are typically responsible for implementing policies, for guidance counselors and other support staff who assist with the policy, for students of educational reform and for parents who must deal with the issue. The publication will aid professionals and concerned citizens who are seeking answers to the challenge of achieving high academic standards and meeting the unique needs of every student.

The information has been organized so readers can skip to a chapter and learn about one aspect of this practice or the entire work can be read for an in-depth exploration of the topic. An up-to-date overview of research findings and bibliography have been provided.

In the pages that follow I will summarize the evidence that has persuaded me that grade retention is no longer an acceptable practice. The basis for my conclusions are reflected in the chapters that critique the research literature. I will also provide a historical perspective for readers who want to know how the practice got started and the context under which it exists today. One chapter will focus on the relationship between grade retention and dropouts. In other sections I will report on the numbers and characteristics of students who are retained, as well as comment on the fiscal perspective of holding students back. Additionally, I will highlight the current legal climate surrounding nonpromotion of students.

Some educators consider transition classes a remedy for children who are not ready for the next grade, thus the pros and cons of the increasingly popular transition grades will be explored. Next I discuss policy implications of the research and suggest a range of policy alternatives to retention. Thoughts will be shared that may be useful to understanding why the practice of grade retention persists, in spite of findings that show it does not work. Finally, a checklist will be provided in the appendix that can be used by schools to begin an assessment of their retention/promotion policy.

WHY THE FOCUS IS ON ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

Given the different curriculum structures of elementary and secondary schools, grade retention rather than subject retention is a practice more suited to and typically found in elementary schools. Subject retention refers to when students are recommended to repeat only one subject as opposed to repeating all subjects, and fits better with the secondary school's departmentalized curriculum. It is less apt to have as potent an impact on students as grade retention. Since the experience of subject retention is radically different from grade retention it will not be included in this review, hence the focus will be

primarily on elementary schools. It is true, however, that some middle schools and junior highs (and even, occasionally, a high school) have students spend two years in one grade so the monograph will also be useful to them.

CHAPTER 2: Historical Context

THE PAST:

Retention has been around a long time. During the nineteenth century, grammar schools began to institute a graded structure and concomitantly, the practice of grade retention emerged. In 1838, Henry Barnard delivered a lecture "Gradation of Public Schools, with Special Reference to Cities and Large Villages," which commenced his crusade to transform America's heterogeneous classrooms into a systematic plan of gradation based on the Prussian model. Others, like Horace Mann in Massachusetts and John Pierce in Michigan, joined this campaign for a new classification system of students that eventually would divide elementary schools into eight distinct grades. (Tyack, 1974)

Goodlad and Anderson (1987) report that the start of the graded structure, a precursor to grade retention, was influenced by five major developments

1. the movement toward public, state-supported education;
2. the practical success and astonishing economy of the monitorial system*;
3. the several appeals of German education as interpreted by American spokesmen;
4. the call for trained teachers, answered in part by the founding of state-supported normal schools; and
5. the appearance of graded schoolbooks in all areas of instruction. (p. 48)

*Monitors were typically older students trained by the teacher to help with teaching activities and duties.

As the new graded system took hold, there evolved a perceived need for a uniform course of study and standard examinations. When pupils did not attain certain academic benchmarks they were forced to repeat a grade, in much the same way that students are retained today, well over a hundred years later.

Grade retention policies met with criticism then as now. For example, during the early 1900's educators took an interest in more scientific measures of student ability and achievement, with an aim toward obtaining greater school efficiency. Grade retention became an issue for the "educational scientists" since it jarred their sense of order, representing waste and failure.

Retention became a problem of some magnitude and disturbed the public as well as school officials. When the school superintendent of New York declared that at least a third of the students attending elementary schools were over the normal age for their grade, the press had a field day attacking schools. Leonard Ayres wrote in 1909

> Under our present system there are large numbers of children who are destined to live lives of failure. We know them in the schools as the children who are always a little behind physically, a little behind intellectually, and a little behind in the power to do. Such a child is the one who is always 'It' in the competitive games of childhood. (cited in Tyack, 1974. p.199)

So as educators and parents awakened to the potentially detrimental effects of retention on a student's self-concept, social factors became a consideration when it was time to decide for or against promotion.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, research in the new disciplines psychology and sociology showed the importance of a developing child's emotional well-being. Peer groups were also found to be significant to the maturation process. These findings became factors in retention/promotion decisions. (Hess, 1978) With a changing perception of the value of grade retention, reinforced by new research findings, schools began to adopt "social promotion" policies. "Social promotion" or "automatic promotion" policies meant promotion was based on social variables rather than just academics. As social promotion policies became popular academically based policies faded.

THE PRESENT:

Today the trend is to move away from policies supported by social and psychological variables as schools shift toward enforcing stricter academic standards for promotion and graduation. A recent flood of state and national education reform reports are urging increased academic standards and more rigorous promotion policies. For example in A Nation at Risk, the National Commission on Excellence in Education recommends that schools become more demanding and require all students to take more courses in academic subjects in order to qualify for a high school diploma. These reports have led some educators to predict that if such changes are implemented alone they could produce a higher dropout rate. (Hamilton, 1986; McDill, Natriello & Pallas, 1986, 1985) The concern is that not enough attention has been directed in these reports to how the new goals will be achieved. Nor has there been adequate discussion about how to help students who do not achieve the new goals. Thus there could be unintended negative consequences for the at-risk youth.

Eager to prove that students are being educated and to

demonstrate school accountability, about forty states have called for minimum competency testing programs in schools. Many states mandate students must pass tests to move from one grade to the next, before they graduate from high school, or both. One consequence is more students are retained. This is happening even though the retention research does not show that test scores (one criterion) are the best measure of who (if anyone) might benefit from being held back a grade. (Illinois Fair Schools Coalition, 1985; Lieberman, 1980) Minimum competency tests are "burying" the practice of social promotions, writes Thompson (1979). He goes on to say it follows that school boards throughout the U.S. can expect to be reevaluating promotion/retention policies.

A recent Gallup Poll reveals that almost three quarters of Americans (72%) favor stricter requirements for promotion from grade to grade. (Gallup, 1986) Many people believe that social promotions have contributed to the devaluing of a high school diploma. It appears educators and the general public concur on wanting schools to enforce higher standards.

Given these trends the retention rate will climb markedly. Concurrently, we will witness a rising concern over what the Japanese call ochikobore, i.e. those who have fallen to the bottom of the system.

CHAPTER 3: Link Between Grade Retention and Dropouts

PREDICTORS OF DROPPING OUT:

We have known for many years that there is a strong association between grade retention and dropping out. Dropouts leave behind a trail of school failures which typically includes failing a grade or two.

Bachman (1971) conducted a longitudinal study of males (beginning in their sophomore year) and found that two of the most important predictors of dropping out are poor grades and being held back. He estimates that 40% of boys who have failed a grade will drop out, in contrast to 10% of boys who never were retained. Furthermore, being retained twice increases the risk of dropping out by 90%. As early as 1965, Cervantes was studying male and female high school students and also found grade retention to be a predictor of dropping out: 85% of the dropouts in his study were behind one year, 53% were behind two or more years. Using ethnographic research techniques, Fine (1986) more recently determined that urban adolescent dropouts have much experience with school failure and have been held back at least once.

Few studies specifically look at elementary school indicators of dropping out. One such study, however, found six predictors of black urban male dropouts, one of which is "school

retardation" (grade retention). (Stroup & Robins, 1972) Two other studies (Lloyd, 1968; Lloyd & Bleach, 1973) ascertained that characteristics of sixth and third grade students predicted who would drop out and when. It was found that the strongest predictor of when a student would drop out was age. The older a child is in third grade, the earlier she or he is likely to dropout. Overage in these three studies was attributed to nonpromotion.

Thus the relationship between grade retention and dropouts has been well documented. Almost no one claims that retention causes dropouts. Instead researchers portray grade retention as just one of the steps along the path to dropping out. The Illinois Fair Schools Coalition (1985), however, makes the flat assertion that retention pushes students out of school. Nonetheless, if grade retention in the primary grades is a strong predictor of future dropouts, then issues relating to it mount in importance. Once students are considered candidates for retention, all further educational decisions surrounding them should be viewed as critical since these children are also at risk of never receiving a high school diploma.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS & DROPOUT PREVENTION:

Recommendations abound throughout the dropout literature for early identification of potential dropouts, together with recurring cries for early intervention. (e.g., Beck & Muia, 1980; Cervantes, 1965; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986; Howard & Anderson, 1978; Kaplan & Luck, 1977) This common sense approach to dropout prevention is not exclusive to junior highs and secondary schools but should apply as well to the elementary setting. "The problem begins much earlier than high school, in the primary grades," comments Tirozzi, Connecticut's Commissioner of Education, "And until we can really put the resources in the primary grades, we're going to continue to put out fires at the other end." (cited in Hamilton, 1987) For many children, the seeds of failure are planted during the initial school years.

A logical place to intervene, then, is with those individuals who are falling behind in elementary classes and whose teachers think they can't make it to the next grade. An array of warning signals should go off as soon as these children are identified. Ideally, the time to identify and respond to at-risk students is at the earliest stages rather than waiting for the end of the school year, i.e. at the first signs of failure. The decision-makers in schools must recognize there is a serious problem and consider offering educational alternatives to eradicate the symptoms of failure. It's important to remember that success in school, i.e. graduating, translates into a greater likelihood of achieving success after school.

CHAPTER 4: How Many Students Are Retained Locally and Nationally? Who Are They?

With such a long history of grade retention in the U.S., one might assume educators know a lot about the practice, yet national statistics on grade retention are not systematically collected nor are state-wide data consistently available. Thus estimates of the numbers and the projected profile of characteristics are based on inadequate data.

NUMBER OF RETAINEES:

Notwithstanding, the National Education Association conducted a survey of 2000 teachers in 1982 and found that a third of the teachers reported students were being retained due to academic deficiencies. (Niklason, 1984) According to Jackson (1975) the best source of national grade retention figures is unpublished (and now outdated) data collected in the Elementary and Secondary School Surveys conducted by the Office for Civil Rights in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. These data indicate that 1,007,539 elementary and high school students were not promoted in the 1971-72 academic year. Jackson goes on to say that grade retention rates vary greatly among states and between minority and nonminority pupils. For example, the 1971-72 rates in Minnesota were 0.7% for minorities and 0.5% for nonminorities while Mississippi and the District of Columbia showed respective rates of 9.3% & 4.8% and 8.2% & 2.4%.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RETAINEES:

Researchers have evidence that connects retainees with certain characteristics. They inform us that children are most likely to be retained if they are

(a) male;
(b) of black or Spanish origin;
(c) from families below the poverty level;
(d) a member of a linguistic minority;
(e) handicapped;
(f) from families where the head of household does not have a high school diploma; and
(g) from the southeastern region of the U.S. (Illinois Fair Schools Coalition, 1985; Niklason, 1984; Rose, Medway, Cantrell & Marus, 1983; Safer, Heaton & Allen, 1977)

While I trust these correlations it must be noted that they are either based on limited samples or have been inferred from data sets such as the U.S. Census Bureau reports. Yet to strengthen these findings one can think about the relationship between retention and dropouts. Since grade retention is a harbinger of dropping out then the characteristics of dropouts, which we know so much about, should be a near mirror image of retainees--and this appears to be the case.

A study conducted by the Office of Statistics of UNESCO (1984) reports that the overall level of grade repetition in the United States is very low in comparison to other countries around the world. Data for the U.S., however, was not provided. A large disparity in the retention distribution pattern of countries according to region was uncovered by UNESCO Repetitions in 1980 ranged from 0 to 47% in Africa, from 4 to 26% in Latin America and the Caribbean, from 0 to 18% in Asia and Oceania, and from 0 to 19% in Europe and the USSR. A worldwide repetition rate of 10% was calculated.

So it appears there are isolated attempts to ascertain just how many and who are the students annually held back in the U.S. and elsewhere. Despite the absence of consistent hard data, the practice is believed to be widespread. To confirm this assumption, school districts, state departments of education, the national office of education and/or the Census Bureau ought to collaborate and systematically collect information about grade retention. Such data would be useful to the evaluation process of retention policies and practices. These data could also help elucidate which students are prone to grade retention, what types of schools are more likely to retain students and which retention policies are more successful than others. If dropout data was also systematically compiled then it would be most instructive to statistically assess the two data sets.

CHAPTER 5: Financial Costs of Grade Retention

HOW TO CALCULATE COST:

It has been pointed out that when computing the costs of grade retention there are really two types of costs: retention costs and remediation costs. (Illinois Fair Schools Coalition, 1985) Retention costs reflect expenses relating to providing an extra year of education. Remediation costs refer to expenditures for giving students special remedial help.

Another variable that could be factored into the expense of grade retention is a percentage of the fiscal drain dropouts place on society. Accepting that holding students back is associated with leaving school early, i.e. without a diploma in hand, then a portion of the price society pays because of dropouts should be absorbed into the overall cost of grade retention. This could be thought of as a long-term cost while the extra year and remediation are immediate expenses.

The UNESCO study referred to earlier speaks of wastage in education as those obstacles which prevent an educational system from achieving its goals. An assumption is made that students are expected to complete their education within a prescribed period of time. Therefore grade repetition and dropping out are both considered to involve wastage. Repeating a class is said to be wastage

> since those repeating reduce the enrolment capacity of their class thus preventing other children from being admitted, or causing overcrowding, which raises the cost of education. (p. 346)

It follows then that a school manifesting a high rate of retention has a high rate of wastage. A school with a low rate of wastage, however, may enforce a policy of automatic promotion which does not necessarily mean it is a better educational system. The UNESCO authors acknowledge the limitation of the definition, since it does not account for possible benefits derived from a second year spent in a grade.

ISOLATED ATTEMPTS TO PROJECT COST:

Since statistics concerning numbers of students retained are difficult to derive, the same is true for information regarding expenses. (If you don't know how many students are retained it is difficult to determine cost.) Yet there are isolated attempts to compute costs. For example, an affluent school district in Virginia reports the cost of retaining 900 pupils in one year was $4.5 million. (Bracey, 1985) Using unpublished data, Jackson (1975) computed a rough estimate of between $739 and $903 million for the cost to the U.S. during the 1971-72 school year. Niklason (1984) calculated a cost of well over $4 billion to public education for 1979-80. These staggering figures are conservative and if one were to adjust these amounts according to today's rate of inflation they would, naturally, be even greater.

In sum, it is evident that grade retention costs time and money, for a child who repeats is getting one grade for the duration and price of two. Interestingly, sparse attention has been given to the amount of expenditures relative to grade retention. The extent of those costs is unclear and deserves further investigation as does the relationship between costs and benefits to students. Another critical question to address is whether there are other more effective ways to use this money to help children in trouble. It is likely that this money, already in the budget, could be used to fashion a better child support program. Our responsibility for students along with diminishing budgets and a national concern over declining test scores, demand that we use our resources in the most efficient manner.

CHAPTER 6: Legal Considerations of Grade Retention

A REVIEW OF COURT DECISIONS:

According to Walden and Gamble (1985), legal challenges to school district retention/promotion policies are increasing. They review the major court cases in this area and conclude, among other things, schools would be better off from a legal standpoint, if they utilized multiple criteria to make retention

decisions. Students' grades, test scores and attendance records are considered appropriate.

The cases surveyed reflect the court's tradition of deferring to the schools as experts in establishing educational policy. For example, in support of teachers' authority to evaluate students' academic performance and issue grades (grades which influence promotion/retention decisions), the court held in the Sandlin v. Johnson case that

> Decisions by educational authorities which turn on academic performance of a student as it relates to promotion are peculiarly within the expertise of educators and are particularly inappropriate for reviews in a judicial context. (p. 611)

The courts do not want to challenge the grades a teacher gives, provided the grades were not arbitrary and can be justified.

Holding that a board of education could raise its grade promotion standards, another court said

> a program of retention for students who do not perform satisfactory work is both acceptable and desirable. (p. 611)

Walden and Gamble go on to say that tests on which promotion decisions hinge must be reliable and valid. Districts must insure that their schools are offering instruction in the areas measured by the examinations. More than one chance should be provided when using a test to determine if a student is awarded a high school diploma. The courts favor remedial education for students who fail these tests. Attendance policies must also be defensible on educational terms. The courts recommend that districts avoid formulating policies that penalize students twice for the same offense. Essentially, any promotion/retention policies should be carefully tailored to educational goals.

While the cases presented by Walden and Gamble only deal with objective criteria to render retention decisions, the courts will accept other professional judgments when they have a logical basis. Thus psychological and social factors need not be excluded. Walden and Gamble further suggest that schools include teachers, principals and parents in the decision to retain or promote.

Also reviewing the legal side of the retention/promotion controversy, Stroup and Zirkel (1983) summarize the courts' position as follows

> 1. Courts will probably continue to defer to school officials on promotion/retention decisions when such decisions are based on multiple traditional criteria and individualized academic judgement. Courts may look more closely at promotion/retention decisions based on

single criterion applied mechanically.

2. A radical change in promotion requirements may alter a student's legitimate expectation of promotion and graduation and thus may require adequate prior notice.

3. Courts will probably assume that schools have informal procedures for challenging the accuracy of retention decisions and will not impose additional procedural requirements.

4. Any retention/promotion system which has a disproportionate impact on a minority group will be more closely scrutinized, particularly if the school system was previously segregated. The burden of proof will be shifted from the plaintiff attacking the school's decision to the school to justify its decision. (pp 216-217)

I would surmise that many school districts could benefit from a review of their grade retention policy, using the legal guidelines as a foundation. This is not to imply, however, that the only or best solution to poor academic performance is retention.

CHAPTER 7: A Critical Review of Research on the Effects of Grade Retention

OVERVIEW:

Research on the effects of grade retention began as early as 1911 and has continued to the present, with most studies conducted between 1960 and 1975. The theoretical and empirical support for retention is sparse, questionable or altogether missing. In the first comprehensive and well executed review of retention studies, Jackson (1975) concluded that we still have no clear evidence that the practice is better than promotion. Studies that have appeared since Jackson's paper are generally consistent with his conclusions. Jackson's excellent and important analysis is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. (Some readers may wish to refer to his comments on how the design of studies has biased the research findings, prior to reading the review of research.)

A majority of studies examine the effects of retention on children in the early primary grades. Studies typically look at how retention effects academic outcomes and/or social outcomes (e.g. personal adjustment and self-concept). Most researchers have looked at short-term effects rather than conducting longitudinal studies thus we know little about how retention influences students over time. A recent exception to this is the work of Peterson, DeGracie and Ayabe (1987), which is reviewed in

this chapter. Few studies investigate the actual treatment given to children so that we have insufficient information about which (if any) retention model works and for which children. The notable exception here is Leinhardt's 1980 study that I will talk about later in the chapter on transition classes.

In brief, the research to date has failed to show that grade retention significantly benefits students who are experiencing academic or social problems in the classroom. It is essential to know that the research, also, does not indicate that social or automatic promotion improves children's learning rates and enhances social development.

This chapter is devoted to taking the reader through a sampling of the research literature so that she or he can be aware of what the experts have to say, as well as understand why I have concluded that retention is a false solution. First, research that finds positive academic and social affects of retention will be reviewed. Then I will critique the research that finds no effect or negative academic and social affects.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH THAT CLAIMS THERE ARE ADVANTAGES TO ELEMENTARY GRADE RETENTION:

Studies that have found academic achievement gains for retained students favor grade retention policies . Supporters of nonpromotion contend that promoting a child who has not mastered the required material will cause that individual tremendous frustration. The thinking goes that since children learn at different rates, they are entitled to the additional time. Moreover, teachers report that the retention of low achievers leads to a better range of ability levels in the classroom. Also, school systems with automatic promotion policies are thought to diminish some students' motivation to learn because they know they will not be left back.

A.) A LOOK AT STUDIES THAT FIND POSITIVE ACADEMIC EFFECTS OF RETENTION

The Greensville County school system in Virginia attracted national attention when it abolished a social (age based) promotion policy and replaced it with a policy that enforces an academic mastery program. (Cunningham & Owens, 1977; Owens & Koons, 1978; Owens & Ranick, 1977) Students in Greensville are not promoted until they master the academic skills appropriate to their grade level. Standardized test results are a major part of the evaluation process.

The Greensville district has designed intensive instructional programs to specifically meet the needs of slow learning students. For example, retained students are not placed in the same class with children taking the grade for the first time. They are grouped with students their own age. To combat the problem of a grade repeater's boredom, a file has been compiled for teacher use, reflecting the curriculum materials to

which each child has been exposed. Partial promotions are possible with students assigned to a "half-step" grade. The district asserts that it strives for an atmosphere of success.

Interventions have been applied throughout the Greensville system, K-12, to insure the retention policy is reasonable and effective. For example, at the secondary level the flexibility of block scheduling (double periods) permits more individual contact with teachers plus makes subject repetition feasible within the same school year.

The district announces overall positive results since implementing the new retention policy. Achievement test scores have risen and following an initial surge, the retention rates have fallen. Owen claims that with automatic or social promotion policies many students will not study simply because they realize they will be promoted anyway, thus this possible reaction has been avoided in Greensville. Dropout rates have declined and the students, teachers and community are satisfied with the policy and mastery program. Owen does not relate, however, that any control or matched groups were used to draw his conclusions nor were test results for the retainees reported. This means we do not really know the short-term or long-term effect of retention on students.

In an earlier study, Stringer (1960) found that retention seemed to be more helpful than harmful to students' academic performance and that the best predictor of an individual's future learning rate is one's past learning rate. The success of social promotions appeared to be related to parental involvement but the gains diminished during the year following promotion. Far fewer students, however, were used for the second year comparisons.

B.) A LOOK AT STUDIES THAT FIND POSITIVE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF RETENTION

Aside from academics, another major reason numerous students are requested to repeat a grade is immaturity or adjustment difficulties. If all children entered school at the same age and matured at the same rate, which is not the case, retention might not be necessary. (Horn, 1976) Horn administered a mini-survey to primary teachers in a school that allows retention based on reasons of immaturity. All teachers supported the school policy and they estimated that over 80% of the repeating students had been helped. Teachers believed the students developed better self-concepts through successful experiences during the second year, and contended that promoting children who are not ready causes floundering and a great sense of failure. Retained students were also surveyed. They indicated that they felt good about themselves and that their work output and attitude toward school was either the same or better than the prior year. This, however, was not a controlled study that matched and compared students. It relied exclusively on the opinions of teachers and students. Yet the study does suggest that the context of retention decisions, e.g. teacher attitude, is crucial in

determining their emotional impact on students.

There are supporters of grade retention who claim students' self-concepts improve following retention, offering the rationale that the students experience less frustration and have more potential for success. Finlayson (1977) studied from 1973-75 the self-concepts of three groups of first graders: nonpromoted, borderline (promoted) and promoted. He found that during the second year, the nonpromoted group continued to increase their self-concept scores significantly, while scores for the other two groups dropped slightly. At the fourth and final measurement period, scores for the nonpromoted and promoted groups converged. The borderline group demonstrated the highest final score, a finding not commented on by the researcher. Could this result mean that promotion for struggling students actually improves their self-concepts?

Responding to a questionnaire distributed by Finlayson, teachers viewed 75% of the nonpromoted children as manifesting a positive self-concept prior to grade retention. This fact may have influenced other findings such as teachers perceiving that the self-concepts of 96% of the nonpromoted children either remained stable or became more positive. Parents of retained students were favorably impressed by the experience of nonpromotion and most would make the same decision again. Over half of these children were seen as happier than the previous year. Twenty-two of the twenty-four families interviewed asserted there was no stigma attached to grade retention. Finlayson concludes that nonpromotion does not appear to be a practice that negatively influences self-concept. Note that he does not conclude nonpromotion positively influences self-concept.

Another study reviewed the effects of retention on children who were required to repeat a grade exclusively because of immaturity and whose IQ's were a minimum of 90. (Scott & Ames, 1969) Retention in this district was based on the Gesell philosophy of child development and learning. (The Gesell viewpoint is based on nativist or hereditarian theory. It contends that children develop according to their own idiosyncratic biological clocks and attempts to teach children before they are ready will be ineffective, causing emotional damage.) Teachers were asked to rate students' behavior in school while parents reported on home behavior. Both teachers and parents responded that the experience was overwhelmingly positive and beneficial. Findings derived from this study, however, are suspect due to the small sample size and the research design itself. Using what Jackson (1975) terms a type two design, twenty-seven students are compared before and after the retention experience without looking at a control group. Thus there is an inherent design bias favoring grade retention. The study also relies heavily on subjective reports.

A learning disabilities specialist, Donofrio (1977), argues that grade retention can help many children with learning

difficulties who exhibit certain constitutional and chronological factors. According to Donofrio, the presence of one or more of the following factors usually necessitates the repetition of one or two grades (kindergarten and first grade)

1. the male sex,
2. a July to December birth date,
3. late maturation,
4. verbal difficulty,
5. an 80 to 90 IQ
6. and the presence of hyperkinesis.

When learning disabilities and one or more of these factors are present, the child "may be best served by 'marking time' to align his psychological 'wave frequency' with that of his behaviors and maturational peers during his 6-hour school day." (p. 351) Thus Donofrio sees grade retention as a positive intervention for students displaying certain characteristics. He offers, however, no data to confirm his assertion that grade repetition is the therapy of choice.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH THAT DISCOVERS NO ADVANTAGES TO GRADE RETENTION:

A host of studies, on the other hand, have found that in terms of achievement and social development many retained students do no better and sometimes worse the second time around in a grade.

A.) A LOOK AT STUDIES THAT FIND NO EFFECT OR NEGATIVE ACADEMIC EFFECTS OF RETENTION

Learning does take time, but providing additional time does not in itself insure that learning will occur. (Karweit, 1984) If the solution to the problem of students who are failing in elementary school is to provide more time, i.e. an extra year in a particular grade, then that second year should reflect that a reasonable amount of learning has been accomplished. One concern about this practice is that if what took place in the classroom the first time did not result in the child meeting grade level objectives, how do we know that the act of repetition alone will achieve the desired outcomes. Another question regarding this strategy is whether the child would have learned as much if he had been promoted?

As far back as 1911, Keyes tried to address these questions. He conducted a seven-year study of 5,000 students in an urban school district and found that of the large number retained, 20% did better academically, 39% showed no change and 40% declined. (cited in Bocks, 1977)

Nearly sixty years ago, Klene and Branson (1929) directed one of the rare studies using an experimental design to investigate the effect of retention on academic achievement

outcomes. They matched children who were to be retained in grades two to six, on the basis of chronological age, mental age and sex. Half the students were promoted while the other half were retained. In terms of measured achievement, Klene and Branson found potential repeaters profited more from promotion than did the repeaters from nonpromotion. Jackson (1975) does point out, however, that the researchers never indicate whether the observed group differences were statistically significant.

While not using an experimental design, Arthur (1936) did go a step further than Keyes by matching and comparing groups of first grade repeaters with groups of nonrepeaters. She found that the average repeater learned no more in two years than did the average nonrepeater in one year. Failure to eliminate the causes of retention, rather than the repeating experience itself, Arthur suggests, may have been the more potent factor in determining the students'subsequent achievement.

Continuing the effort to differentiate between repeaters and nonrepeaters, Farley, Frey and Garland (1933) studied low IQ children who had repeated more than one grade, comparing them to promoted students of the same ability level. Retained students were found not to be performing as well as those who were promoted. The researchers conclude that nonpromotion is more likely to be a deterrent than an impetus to reaching an acceptable achievement level.

In another and more recent attempt to answer the question whether retained students might have done as well if they had been promoted, a retrospective study of 1200 students in North Carolina was completed. (Godfrey, 1972) Godfrey comes to the conclusion that holding students back a grade does not help them "catch up" academically, a typical justification for nonpromotion.

A major study was later completed by North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction (1983) to determine how 1967 pairs of promoted and nonpromoted first graders with identical reading achievement test scores, performed in subsequent years. Over the course of three years, the promoted students gained more each year in reading achievement than the retainees. The nonpromoted group had a higher class rank at the end of the first year but this difference diminished, becoming insignificant by the close of the third year. This research endeavor carries some weight because it is longitudinal, the sample size is large and it tests the effect of first grade retention which is considered by many educators to be prime time for holding students back.

Confirming North Carolina's findings, Niklason (1984) compared students recommended for grade retention with a control group of retainees from two large Utah school districts. Students from the city were seven times more likely to be recommended for retention than students living in the suburban district. In neither district was retention found to profit students academically or socially. She concludes that the

districts' elementary retention rates reflected their different philosophical positions.

Most recently, Peterson, DeGracie and Ayabe (1987) reported on a retrospective study which examined the long-term effect of retention/promotion decisions on the academic achievement of elementary age students. Retained students received remediation through the use of individualized educational plans while the comparison group was socially promoted without remediation. The California Achievement Test scores of first, second and third grade retained students were compared with individually matched promoted students, over the course of four years.

When retained students were compared with their promoted counterparts for the same calendar year, they performed better during the first year. By the second year most retained students lost their superiority, while by the third year there were no differences between the two groups. The implication is that retention does not offer a sustained advantage to students. One exception, however, was second grade retainees maintained a higher performance level in reading than promoted students. It must be remembered that the promoted children in this set of comparisons were taking a test that was one grade level higher than the retainees.

The researchers also made same-grade comparisons, i.e. they wanted to know how retained students perform relative to their promoted peers when they were in the same grade. By the end of three years the first grade retainees lost their advantage over promoted students. However, the study did find that second and third grade retainees sustained a higher performance level for the last two years of comparisons. The finding is not convincing due to the small sample size of this group, yet it deserves further attention. It questions a common belief that the best time to retain is in the first grade.

Peterson, DeGracie and Ayabe state that retention combined with remediation is probably better than retention alone. They do suggest, however, that social promotion with remediation may be more effective than retention plus remediation, and refer to Leinhardt's research. The study done by Leinhardt is reviewed in this monograph's chapter on transition classes.

New York City instituted the Promotional Gates Program in 1981 whereby massive numbers of students were retained if they failed at the end of fourth and seventh grades to attain a minimum score on the California Achievement Test. (see ASCD, 1984 & Illinois Fair Schools Coalition, 1985) A total of 24,000 pupils were not promoted, including 17% of the fourth grade and 26% of the seventh grade. A distinctive feature of this program was the provision of substantial remedial help to students. Even with all the additional support, critics of the program claim the retainees did not do significantly better than promoted students with equivalent academic profiles. The Illinois Fair Schools Coalition contends that retention even when coupled with special

remedial help is not a solution. I recommend readers to an article written by David Labaree (1984) which includes an excellent analysis of New York's Promotional Gates Program.

A study was done in the Boulder, Colorado public schools to examine how kindergarten retentions effect children. (Shepard & Smith, 1985) Students in this study were not randomly assigned to be retained or promoted, rather decisions were based on existing school policies which were either stringent or permissive (i.e., if in doubt they tended to promote). Shepard and Smith did not account for the likelihood that how schools dealt with these children the following year was different, stringent or permissive. None-the-less, matched groups of promoted and non-promoted students were studied by looking at test scores and teacher ratings. There were no differences found between the retained and control groups except for one outcome measure. The authors conclude, "The finding of no benefit on most measures and only a one-month gain in reading raises serious questions about the efficacy of an extra year in kindergarten." (p. 5)

Teachers have often argued that retaining academically unprepared students assists in reducing the wide range of abilities in the classroom. Based on earlier research, Goodlad (1952) concludes that this is not so. A related issue that has never been adequately addressed is what effect retained students have on the rest of the class. Stringer (1960) said her data supported the impression that the retention program is tied to overall educational improvements in the school, yet there was no evidence given to show the retention policy was responsible.

In sum, grade retention is no guarantee that students will meet a school's learning objectives. Based on these studies and others like them, it appears that a multitude of student repeaters will achieve the same or possibly less than they did the first time in a grade. It, of course, comes as no surprise that some retained students increase their skill and knowledge base during the additional year. Yet when comparing nonpromoted students to a matched group of promoted students, there does not appear to be an academic advantage to grade retention. Once we determine how much retained students have learned, the real issue becomes why they learned and at what cost.

B.) A LOOK AT STUDIES THAT FIND NO EFFECT OR NEGATIVE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF RETENTION

Another series of studies have examined the social effects of grade retention. Since schools organize classes around common age groups, retention extricates a child from her peer network placing her with children who are likely to be at another developmental stage. The upshot is an environment which is apt to conflict with, rather than support, the individual in her struggle to adjust. (Hess, 1978)

Findings indicate that nonpromotion may be damaging to

children's self-concepts and contributes to negative attitudes toward school. For example, when a group of fourth, fifth and sixth graders responded to a Child Stress Scale, they rated being retained as a highly stressful event, placing it third out of twenty items-just below losing a parent and going blind. (Yamamoto cited in Shepard & Smith, 1985)

Students who are held back are likely to feel like failures and to become isolated from their peers. Many of these children are subjected to criticism from classmates, parents, relatives and neighbors. It has been said that "once the child receives the failure label and sees himself as a failure, he will rarely succeed in school." (Glasser, 1969, p.97)

When looking at matched groups of retained and promoted students from the same school district, Shepard and Smith (1985) found that not only were there insignificant differences in terms of achievement gains but the affective outcomes for the retained children were negative. A majority (84%) of the nonpromoted students said they were "sad" or "upset" about being retained, a less dramatic response than students in Yamamoto's study yet still significant.

Using a similar research design, Goodlad (1952) reports findings that demonstrate there are differences in the personal-social adjustment between school children who repeat grades and those who do not. Data point to the general difficulty of the nonpromoted students in making satisfactory social adjustments, e.g. they are rejected significantly more by classmates as persons desirable for best friends. Promoted students, however, are apt to be disturbed over their school progress and their home security. Goodlad concludes that the research evidence shows blanket promotion policies are not justified, nevertheless, the evidence supports promotion over nonpromotion as the more defensible educational practice.

Another study specifically looked at whether or not early retention based on Gesell developmental placements affects children's later school performance on standardized tests. (May & Welch, 1984) Two hundred and twenty-three children who took the Gesell Screening Test were later divided into three groups based on the outcomes: (a) "buy a year" (BAY) children tested as developmentally immature and their parents agreed to retention; (b) "overplaced" (OP) children had the same test results as the BAY group but their parents refused retention; and (c) the third group tested as developmentally mature and were coded as traditional (TR). Academic and intellectual test scores indicated that the extra year of school did not help the BAY students who, in fact, performed lower than the OP or TR children. The overplaced children failed to exhibit learning problems as predicted by the Gesell Institute thus contradicting the academic rationale for developmental placements. The authors recommend further research of how developmental placement affects children's social-emotional growth.

The research Godfrey (1972) conducted in North Carolina that was referred to earlier, confirms the belief that retention has detrimental effects on students' self-concepts and attitudes. Using the Tennessee Self Concept Scale, repeating students scored lower on every sub-scale than promoted students. Failing students were inclined

> to doubt their own self-worth, have little confidence in themselves, see themselves as inadequate in social and family situations, and have an unfavorable view of their own behavior and moral worth. (p. 35)

Test scores also indicated that grade retention resulted in poor attitudes and the belief by these students that they are unable to achieve goals possible for most people. Scores from the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Scale denote that retained students lean toward having an external locus of control. Godfrey poses the idea that the answer to retention may lie in an examination of why children fail and in the attempt to provide a learning environment where they can succeed.

In summary, it is clear that an entire group of studies exploring the social consequences of nonpromotion have discovered questionable or harmful results for many children. They raise serious doubts about the merit of grade retention for children. They also present findings that contradict the work of other researchers, causing numerous educators to wonder whom to believe.

CHAPTER 8: Methodological Problems Cast Doubt on Most Research Findings

THE IMPORTANT CONCLUSIONS OF JACKSON:

When conducting an extensive meta-analysis of research on the effects of grade retention, Jackson (1975) found an inherent bias in the design of a vast majority of studies. Therefore methodological problems render many of the previously mentioned findings and theories questionable.

Jackson grouped the available research into three categories based on analytical design as follows

TYPE 1 The first type compares the outcomes of students retained under normal school policies with the outcomes of students promoted under normal school policies. He asserts this comparison is biased in favor of grade promotion. That is because it compares retained students who are experiencing difficulties with promoted students who usually are not having such severe difficulties, as evidenced by the fact that they have been promoted. Even when students are matched, e.g. according to achievement test scores, IQ, age, sex, grade level and/or socioeconomic status, Jackson argues there is not enough

assurance that comparisons are made among pupils undergoing similar difficulties as relevant to grade retention.

TYPE 2 The second type of design compares the outcomes of retained students before and after their retention. Since no comparison group is used and there is no control for improvement due to factors other than retention, the bias here is toward grade retention. Jackson claims this design not only fails to assess the advantages of grade retention but could result in the conclusion that successful students would benefit from being held back.

TYPE 3 The third category involves an experimental design whereby students recommended for retention are randomly promoted or retained, and at a later point in time are compared. This is the only bias-free design. Unfortunately, the three studies with an experimental format raise doubts because they were completed more than forty-five years ago. While Jackson strongly campaigns for more research embracing the type three design, it is unlikely we will soon witness many such studies given the perceived ethical questions regarding the random assignment of children to school programs. This means educators are choosing to base their retention/promotion decisions on less than adequate research. It also suggests the need for educational leaders and policy makers to rethink the value of conducting randomized controlled field trials. It may be more unethical to act as if an educational practice (or treatment) is beneficial when that outcome has never been adequately documented.

Jackson believes there should be more research done of a much higher quality. He clarifies the weaknesses of past research and suggests the following should be avoided

(1) the failure to sample from a population large and diverse enough to allow broad generalization of the findings;

(2) the failure to define carefully the treatments, for many different things can happen to children who are retained in a grade or promoted in spite of their difficulties, and the treatments are likely to have different effects;

(3) the failure to investigate interaction effects between treatments, general characteristics of subjects, the conditions for which subjects were considered for grade retention, and characteristics of the schools;

(4) the failure to investigate long-term as well as short-term effects. (p. 628)

According to Jackson, promotion is not necessarily better than nonpromotion; the available research is too poor to make valid inferences regarding the advantages of one treatment (promotion

or grade retention) over the other. The four weaknesses, however, could serve as excellent guides for those who choose to continue researching the efficacy of grade retention.

MATTHEWS AND HOLMES' FINDINGS:

In a more recent study also applying quantitative meta-analysis techniques, Holmes and Matthews (1984) arrived at the conclusion that Jackson had not been strong enough in his conclusions. Their synthesis of 44 research studies is as follows

> Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes. Because this cumulative research evidence consistently points to negative effects of nonpromotion, the burden of proof legitimately falls on proponents of retention plans to show there is compelling logic indicating success of their plans when so many other plans have failed. (p. 232)

Holmes and Matthews reveal that when studying matched groups of students, the retainees obtained smaller gains in terms of academic achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept and attitude toward school as compared to promoted students.

CHAPTER 9: Are Transition Classes A Wise Alternative to Repeating?

WHAT IS A TRANSITION CLASS?

Rather than retaining a student in the same grade for two years, some schools have created a special intermediary grade for children lagging behind their classmates. Students identified as unready to be promoted according to schedule are, instead, placed in transition rooms, for instance pre-first or pre-second grades. While transition classes are a form of nonpromotion, they may differ from grade retention, e.g. some transition classes do not receive the same instruction as the previous year. These at-risk students are grouped together in one class and taught by a transition room teacher (e.g., pre-one students have a pre-one teacher as opposed to the kindergarten or first grade teacher). At the end of the transition class experience students are mainstreamed, although they permanently remain a year behind when considering chronological age.

Many educators believe that transition classes are a viable alternative to grade retention. In fact, some transition class proponents insist that their programs represent a promotion not retention. Transition programs do offer children a new opportunity to grow and learn, together with students undergoing similar school adjustment problems. Yet, here again, the bulk of

the research does not support this educational practice as a means to enhance social and academic development when compared to promotion.

RESEARCH ON TRANSITION CLASSES:

Leinhardt (1980), for example, conducted a study of the effectiveness of transition room placements in a middle to low income urban school district with a predominantly black student population. Some students considered eligible for pre-one transition rooms were placed in regular first grade classes. One group of these students was taught using the traditional basal reading series while another group was instructed with an individualized reading program (New Reading System, NRS). The achievement of these two groups was compared to the progress made by children placed in a self-contained transition class who were using the individualized reading program.

At the end of the year, it was found that transition room-eligible students who had been promoted and received the individualized reading instruction, outperformed the other two groups of students. Leinhardt concludes that these results can be attributed to placement in a regular, integrated classroom along with the individualized reading program.

A distinguishing aspect of this study is the attention paid to treatment within the classroom. The individualized instructional approach was found to be more effective in the integrated setting with this at-risk population of students although, unfortunately, the basal approach was not tested with students in the transition room. Despite the fact that the adult/student ratio was three times greater in the transition rooms, these students received an average of 2 1/2 hours per week less reading instruction than either of the other two groups, and they covered less material. Regular class teachers tested their students 15 times more frequently than transition room teachers. Leinhardt summarizes

> ...students in an integrated setting with NRS (both transition-eligible and regular students) were taught the basics of reading directly, more often, and for longer periods of time, and they demonstrated this by higher performance. (p. 60)

Sample sizes were small which indicates the need for reservation when interpreting results. It also means we need more research of this type done on a larger scale. Additionally, it is important to continue investigating the effect of transition classes on the urban minority students as they will be the majority of tomorrow.

Gredler (1984) comments that the Leinhardt study highlights undesirable features of transition room programs, such as a watered down curriculum and the possibility that negative or lowered expectations of school personnel may contribute to poor

educational outcomes. Gredler, while reviewing the research on transition classes, mentioned only one study, Raygor (1972), that found an initial benefit to transition room and retained kindergarten children. The advantages, however, were not sustained at the end of third and fourth grades. Gredler concludes

> Analysis of the research studies of transition rooms raises questions about the degree of educational "payoff" obtained with such programs. Research indicates that transition room children either do not perform as well or at most are equal in achievement levels to transition room-eligible children placed in regular classrooms. (p. 469)

Gredler recommends that schools consider alternatives to transition rooms such as extending kindergarten to a full day and providing an individualized reading program.

Recently, I met with representatives of a New England public school district that has offered pre-first grade classes for almost ten years. They report the response to the program has been overwhelmingly positive. Teachers, administrators, school board members and parents consider the program to be exemplary. They are proud of making first grade placements in accordance with the Gesell philosophy of child development and are convinced that the results favor their students.

An outside consultant evaluated the program and he, too, found encouraging results. There were some problems with the evaluation, however, such as the absence of longitudinal data, primarily due to student attrition and the use of the same level of the Boehm as a pre and post test for transition room students. Yet the consultant's report was positive and reassuring. From just one visit with the program's enthusiastic and caring administrators, it is easy to see how people are swayed to believing in the value of transition classes. In fact, transition classes are becoming an increasingly popular option all over the country.

It is difficult to contradict the wisdom of so many teachers and parents, for these are the people most directly involved with children. Possibly, researchers ask the wrong questions and thereby are missing something important about the practice of transition rooms, e.g. are transition classes a humane response to a rigid system? I wonder if transition rooms are better than more traditional forms of grade retention. This is a distinct possibility yet we still need to be clear about how transition room students compare with the promoted transition room-eligibles. Furthermore, we must determine what curriculum and teaching style works for which group of students.

CHAPTER 10: Transferability of Ideas that May Help At-Risk Children

WE CAN LEARN FROM THE DROPOUT LITERATURE:

Effectively dealing with at-risk students is not a total mystery. Research on successful dropout prevention programs offers glimmers of hope for the marginal primary school student. Some ideas that we have learned work with secondary level students may be applicable to younger children. If so, they could be transferred and adapted to the elementary grades and middle schools. For example, Hamilton (1986) identified the following four characterisitics of effective dropout prevention programs

(1) they separate potential dropouts from other students;
(2) they have strong vocational components;
(3) they utilize out of classroom learning; and
(4) they are intensive in the sense of being small, having individualized instruction, having low student-teacher ratios and offering more counseling than ordinary schools.

This list could be rewritten for at-risk elementary school students as follows

(1) Periodically separate potential retainees from other students, e.g. for summer school and/or for after school programs. (With so many working parents today, summer and after school programs might be a welcome alternative to other forms of childcare arrangements. A recent study conducted by Louis Harris & Associates reinforces the importance of this idea. (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1987) It was found that a majority of the teachers they surveyed say the major reason children have difficulty in school is their isolation and lack of supervision after school.)

(2) Provide and support a curriculum that focuses on basic literacy and numeracy skills during the early primary grades.

(3) Be sure your program has a strong hands-on component and frequent experiential field trips. This can help link school learning to the real world of young students.

(4) Offer classes that have individualized instruction along with low student-teacher ratios, and insure students have easy access to guidance counselors and other support staff.

These ideas can also be adapted to meet the needs of middle school students.

Good dropout prevention programs contain what Mann (1986) calls the four C's-cash, care, computers and coalitions. The first C refers to creating a link between earning and learning. It is applicable to elementary schools in that they can begin exposing children to the world of work and strive to help youngsters see the connection between doing well in school and career success. Care, the second C, stands for the care and concern that children require from adults. If primary schools are too large and impersonal to provide the sort of individual attention and care that children need, then to fill the void schools could arrange to have mentors (or "big brothers" and "big sisters") from the upper grades and community. The third C is computers and refers to utilizing technology for instructional and student management purposes.

Coalition-building, the fourth C, responds to the need for groups external to the school to get involved. Mann asserts

> If complex problems require ambitious solutions, the problem of early school leaving ought to implicate everyone--schools, youth employment programs, civic agencies, parents, community-based organizations, business and industry. (p. 319)

Since part of the problem begins in the early years, coalitions need to focus on the issues of at-risk primary students if they want to fully address the dropout problem. It's not hard to see that the four C's would help struggling elementary and middle school students too.

In summary, elementary school administrators ought to pay closer attention to research regarding high school dropouts and borrow some ideas and practices for their own students. They may also learn something about their own students by studying dropouts.

WE CAN LEARN FROM HIGHER EDUCATION RETENTION LITERATURE:

There is yet another less traditional place to look for insights on how to assist children not making it in elementary school--higher education literature that addresses retention issues. (see Gardner & Jewler, 1985; Upcraft, 1984) In this case, retention refers to keeping students in college, i.e. the holding ability of post-secondary institutions, rather than having students repeat a grade.

Higher education has been increasingly recognizing the importance of the freshman year as a critical transition period. This is when the foundation is set for either a positive or negative learning experience. If things go well a student is likely to leave a few years later, diploma in hand, while if the the beginning year was poor, the student is apt to withdraw before completing the degree requirements. The same rationale

fits the elementary-secondary school system. If children have successful experiences during the primary grades there is a greater chance they will succeed in high school.

Colleges and universities invest money and other resources into helping entering students adjust academically and socially to a new learning environment. Numerous institutions have hired full-time orientation directors who organize and implement extensive programs to facilitate a smooth transition. Special seminars to teach and guide new students about collegiate life are becoming more popular across the country. There is even an annual national conference for both academics and student affairs professionals that concentrates on improving the overall quality of the freshman year. If there is such a need to help high school graduates adjust to college, then there has to be an even greater need to help five and six year olds adapt to schools.

In years past, kindergartens served as the introductory and transitional experience from home to school. Yet with so many children attending pre-schools and the present push for children to learn more sooner, kindergartens are fulfilling this purpose less and less. A complicating factor is the majority of states do not mandate attendance in kindergarten. Thus school officials should collaborate to establish programs that enhance movement into structured learning environments for all young children. Or, alternatively, schools should tolerate more gradual and irregular progress in the early grades.

CHAPTER II: Implications for Policy Makers

Jackson (1975), perhaps, best sums up the research by concluding there is no reliable body of evidence indicating that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties. This means policy makers who adopt rigid retention/promotion policies are doing so at the risk of wasting valuable learning time and of throwing away taxpayers' dollars.

CURRENT RETENTION/PROMOTION POLICY OPTIONS:

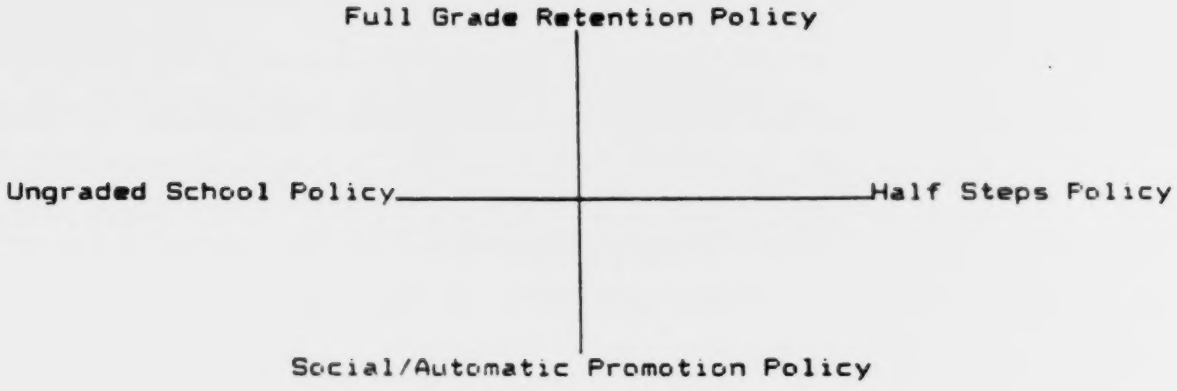
A range of policy approaches to student progress through school is depicted in Diagram I. A two dimensional diagram is used to demonstrate the four major retention/promotion models: full grade retention policy, social/automatic promotion policy, ungraded school policy and a half steps policy. Many interventions can intersect with these policy models including

1) Parental Involvement,
2) Individualized Diagnosis,
3) Individualized Instruction,
4) Remediation and
5) Social Support Services.

These variables are important to the success of programs for at-risk children. They are included in some district's programs and, unfortunately, are absent in others. So policy makers do have options. Some are better than others.

Diagram I

Policy Approaches to Student Progress Through School



ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION & AUTOMATIC PROMOTION:

School administrators should not view this as an either or situation, i.e. retention or automatic promotion, since there exist alternative practices. Two alternatives are suggested below

1. After school & summer school programs, and
2. Remediation within grade level.

"The problem with graded repetition," according to Hess (1978), "lies not in the repetition, but in carrying out the practice on a unitary, all-or-nothing basis. The best alternative to repetition is repetition, but within the context of existing grade levels." (p. 162) So a way to eliminate grade retention is to provide timely, effective remediation within grade level. This translates into remediation at the earliest point of non-mastery. A drawback with remediation during the school day, however, is that this typically means students are missing other instrucional material and activities. Therefore after school and summer school programs could be designed to supplement and reinforce regular classroom instruction. Summer school and promotion with remediation, according to the Illinois Fair Schools Coalition, are worthwhile short-term interventions to

cope with the immediate situation of today's low-achieving students.

PREVENTION INSTEAD OF RETENTION:

Given that retention has not been shown to accelerate learning as compared to ordinary promotion, and social promotion does not solve the problems of slow learners, it follows that educators should explore alternatives. Yet I believe the ideal solution to grade retention is prevention. Rather than continuing to retain students or automatically promote them it would make more sense for schools to invest their time designing effective programs which can avert the need for retention. This means helping children not to fail.

In Table I, I have suggested some strategies that will help prevent the need for grade retention. All the measures represent important policy decisions that should inspire decision-makers to reflect on the district's vision and philosophy of education.

Table I

Strategies to Prevent Need For Retention

1. Offer pre-school programs
2. Mandate kindergarten for all children
3. Provide all-day kindergartens for at-risk children
4. Create nongraded elementary schools
5. Focus on student literacy in elementary schools
6. Develop early warning systems
7. Furnish remediation during year child is failing
8. Offer individualized diagnosis & instruction
9. Adopt characteristics of "effective schools"

A recurring theme in education reports as well as early childhood literature, is the crucial importance of pre-school and early school years to school success. Ravitch and Finn (1987) recently found that 65% of black 17-year-olds who performed in the top range of history knowledge had benefited from pre-school education. At a meeting of the National Governors' Conference, Governor James J. Blanchard of Michigan remarked that, "An effective pre-school strategy can successfully lower the educational and social barriers that confront students." (cited in Hechinger, 1987) In light of all this, public schools could think about offering pre-school programs in order to give all children a "good start". (See, e.g., the work of Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein & Weikart, 1984, at the

High/Scope Educational Research Foundation and McKey, Condelli, Ganson, Barret, McConkey & Plantz, 1985, regarding Head Start for discussions of the merits of pre-school programs.)

Mandatory kindergartens are yet another alternative that could provide schools with an extended opportunity to prepare properly all children for the demands and rigor of first grade. All-day kindergartens should be an option that schools use for children identified as at risk of failure.

A compelling policy strategy that would eliminate promotion and nonpromotion policies as we know them is the nongraded elementary school. Goodlad and Anderson (1987) have argued forcefully for the establishment of multiage, nongraded classes that are team-taught. Three values underlie the nongraded plan

- The nongraded school provides for the continous, unbroken, upward progression of all pupils, the slowest and the most able.
- The nongraded school provides for the irregular upward progression that is characteristic of almost every child.
- The nongraded school provides several alternative vertical classroom placements for every child at any time, no one of which denotes nonpromotion or skipping. (pp 219-220)

Focusing on student literacy in elementary schools is another way to help prevent school failure. Achievement of literacy is the cornerstone of success in schools. Students who are able to develop a solid foundation in reading, writing, listening, speaking and mathematics during the early grades have a greater chance of meeting with academic success. The teaching of these basic literacy skills has become the central objective of Rhode Island's K-3 Student Literacy Project. Another project goal is to encourage teachers to use literature and content areas, e.g. science and social studies topics, to teach the basic skills. Rhode Island's Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, J. Troy Earhart, expects this initiative to help prevent illiteracy and dropouts. Incorporated into the Rhode Island Project is a system to identify children at risk of failing, an idea that is explored below.

Another strategy to eliminate the need for retention is to implement an early warning system that detects the symptoms of failure. Kindergarten teachers have reported that they can tell who the children are who will not make it through school, i.e. which five and six year olds are doomed to failure. Some of these teachers claim they know this as early as October, a mere two months after the children arrive in their classes. So the early identification step may not have to be sophisticated or expensive, e.g. it could rely on teacher judgments. It just needs to be in place and acted upon.

Rather than watching and waiting for students to fail, why not respond to the signals immediately, before the negative pattern becomes entrenched? It is morally irresponsible (some would say corrupt) for a school to give up on failing students and only pay attention to those students more likely to succeed within the current educational structure. Interventions should occur at the earliest point possible. For example, there could be remediation during the year a child is failing. Since there are drawbacks associated with pulling a student out of class for extra help, it would be better to integrate remediation within the context of classtime and/or to offer this assistance after school. Thus educators must rethink the remediation process.

Many children would benefit from individualized diagnosis and instruction. If remediation is simply more of the same, it will not solve the problem for large numbers of students, e.g. those who have learning styles incompatible with their teachers' instructional style. Benjamin Bloom (1981) through his notion of mastery learning proposes

> Failure of children to succeed with learning tasks should be regarded as a failure of curriculum and instruction rather than as a failure of the children. It is likely that some children will need more time and assistance to complete a specific learning task than will others. However, the repeating of a grade or year of work at this level would seem to be an inappropriate procedure. (p. 108)

The "effective schools" research has identified school characteristics that are associated with high rates of student achievement. It has been found that when certain features are present in schools, student achievement can be even higher than expected. Thus I recommend districts study this literature and consider as a strategy adopting the characteristics of "effective schools". These characteristics include

1. Clear and focused school goals
2. Instructional leadership
3. Climate of high expectations
4. Time on task
5. Frequent monitoring of student progress
6. Home-school relations
7. Safe and orderly environment.
   (Rhode Island Educational Leadership Academy, 1986)

Prevention is also the policy endorsed by the Illinois Fair Schools Coalition as the best way to conquer the problem of school failure. They urge schools to abandon costly holdback programs and instead focus on the following four reform strategies, all of which are consistent with those listed in Table I

(a) early childhood education;

(b) implementing effective school and classroom practices;
(c) early remediation, including responding to special learning needs; and
(d) multi-grade grouping.

The Coalition refers to these steps as the long-term approach to stop failure and to get at the roots of the problem.

CHAPTER 12: Reasons Why Retention Practices Persist

A REVIEW OF THE BARRIERS TO CHANGE:

Why do so many schools remain faithful to the practice of grade retention despite an accumulation of non-supportive evidence? Some possible explanations are listed below.

. Teachers and parents observe progress during the extra year and are satisfied that the retained children are doing better than if they had been promoted.

. Teachers do not have the opportunity to observe the growth of children over an extended period of time because of the structure of most public schools. Thus they miss out on seeing that a majority of the at-risk students who were promoted are eventually the same or better off than the retainees.

. Parents of retained children are usually supportive of the experience and reassure teachers that they would make the same decision again.

. Teachers are reluctant to pass on to a colleague students who are not ready for the next grade level. This could be due to a sense of responsibility for the children who are failing, i.e. they feel promotion in such cases would be a negative reflection of their teaching ability.

. There are no alternatives perceived other than retention and special education. Retention may be preferred to special education.

. Some educators are convinced by the research that found positive effects of retention. Others are unfamiliar with and/or mistrust the research literature.

. Educators and parents who believe in the Gesell philosophy of child development are likely to support retention.

. A school cannot afford to do anything else and believes retention is the best they have to offer.

. A school wants to set an example with retention and motivate other children. Nonpromotion is viewed as a deterrent to the majority of students, assuming that students perceive

retention as an unpleasant experience. This fear of retention may also motivate students' parents to help their children do better in school.

. A school may want to reward children who do well by promoting them and punish children who fail by retaining them.

. Nonpromotion may be considered a management tool that promotes homogeneity in the classrooms.

. Retention may continue in schools simply because that is how it has always been done and the school staff is not open to change. School officials and teachers may resist hearing that what they have been doing for so long is not in the best interest of students.

. There may be political reasons, e.g. a response to the increasing pressure to demonstrate that students have achieved certain district or state mandated learning outcomes. Nonpromotion may raise a district's test scores thereby improving the district's public image.

. School policy makers think retention will satisfy parents and other community members that they are helping children who fail.

Thus one can find a variety of reasons to explain why grade retention persists. This list demonstrates obstacles change agents are up against if they want to alter a practice that has been an integral part of the U.S. public school system for so long.

CHAPTER 13: Conclusion

GRADE RETENTION AND AUTOMATIC PROMOTION: THE DEMISE OF A DREAM

It is time for schools to shed the narrow, limited view that grade retention is the best we can do for failing students. Institutions exist to serve people. The practice of nonpromotion may meet the needs of the school but does not benefit children, thus it should be abandoned. A policy of automatic promotion does not solve the problem either.

If a district realizes that large numbers of students are annually retained, then it is time to reevaluate. The time for self-examination has also arrived for those districts with a social promotion policy which automatically passes unprepared, unskilled children through the system. These communities should look at how educational services are being delivered, the quality of instruction, the relevance of the curriculum and assess what kind of learning environment exists for the children. It is possible that changes need to be implemented within the

organization itself, whereby schools could share in the blame and in the solution set rather than putting the burden and blame on the children. New and better policies and practices are possible; some were mentioned in this monograph.

The goal of educational leaders and boards of education who want to reform retention/promotion policies should not be simply to lower the number of retainees, but to rescue children from failure and insure that they receive a quality education. Schools must pay closer attention to children who are failing during the early primary grades and to children who do not appear developmentally ready to move on with their peers. The key is to rethink how we can respond to the needs of this growing population of students.

Strategies that successfully serve at-risk students should not be exclusive to the child experiencing difficulties in school. Such strategies are relevant to all students. By adequately coping with learning and developmental problems of elementary age children, schools might be helping to avoid the tragedies of dropping out and illiteracy that beset so many teenagers. If we are able to help each child learn and be the best that she or he is capable of, that is the American dream for public education.

APPENDIX

CHECKLIST TO REVIEW CURRENT RETENTION/PROMOTION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Part I
Retention/Promotion Policy Checklist

To facilitate an assessment of current retention/promotion policies, districts can use the checklist below as a guide.

1. Does your district have an established retention/promotion policy, written or unwritten?

2. How does the policy fit with your district's philosophy and goals for public education?

3. Does your policy limit the number of times a student may be retained? What provisions are there for a child who reaches that limit?

4. How do you define the treatment or retention model that you use? In other words, what happens to a child during the second time around in a grade? For example

   a) Will special consideration be given to the causes of learning problems?

   b) Will the child have an individualized educational plan?

   c) Will you try to match the child's learning style to a teacher's instructional style?

   d) Will the child have the same teacher or a new teacher?

   e) Will the child experience the same curriculum or a new curriculum?

   f) Will the child receive remediation?

   g) Will the child receive social support services?

5. Does your policy address the needs of at-risk students who are promoted?

6. How do you define the treatment for at-risk students who are promoted? For example

   a) Will special consideration be given to the causes of learning problems?

   b) Will the child have an individualized educational plan?

c) Will you try to match the child's learning style to a teacher's instructional style?

d) Will the child receive remediation?

e) Will the child receive social support services?

7. Do you systematically track the short and long-term progress of retainees? Do you consider both academic and social variables?

8. Do you systematically track the short and long-term progress of at-risk students who are promoted? Do you consider both academic and social variables?

9. Do you know what effect your retention/promotion policy has on the academic and social development of students? If so, how do you know the effect can be attributed to this policy rather than something else?

10. Do you systematically collect data about dropouts and compare results with retainee data?

11. Do you have a system to identify children early in the school year who are at risk of failing? If so, what are the options for teachers of these at-risk children?

12. Is there a process whereby elementary school staff members can talk to colleagues in the middle and secondary schools to exchange information about student progress?

13. Have you considered offering alternatives to retention and/or automatic promotions?

14. Have you considered measures that would prevent the need for retention and/or automatic promotions in your district?

Part II
Collecting Data About Students

I suggest that each school systematically collect student data for retainees and dropouts. Use your findings to better understand what is happening in your district, e.g. look for correlations, patterns and trends, and develop appropriate interventions. Two questions to guide your work are: Does retention predict dropping out? What can you learn from this data to prevent students from being retained and dropping out? It is advisable to complete a profile for each grade level as well as develop a summary for the entire school. To get a macro picture this information could be sent to the district office in order to be pooled with data from other local schools.

1. a) How many students have been retained once?

   b) How many students have been retained more than once?

2. a) Compare the number of retainees by sex.

   b) Compare the number of dropouts by sex.

3. a) What is the percentage of students who are retained according to ethnicity?

   b) What is the percentage of students who dropout according to ethnicity?

4. a) What is the socio-economic status of retainees?

   b) What is the socio-economic status of dropouts?

5. a) What is the percentage of retainees who have limited English proficiency or for whom English is their second language?

   b) What is the percentage of dropouts who have limited English proficiency or for whom English is their second language?

6. a) What is the grade point average of retainees?

   b) What is the grade point average of dropouts?

7. a) How do retainees score on standardized tests?

   b) How do dropouts score on standardized tests?

8. a) What percentage of retainees are handicapped?

   b) What percentage of dropouts are handicapped?

9. a) What percentage of retainees are learning disabled?

   b) What percentage of dropouts are learning disabled?

10. a) What is the age of school entry for retainees?

    b) What is the age of school entry for dropouts?

11. What percentage of students in each grade are retained?

12. Is there a grade when students are most likely to be retained?

13. Can the grade of retention predict dropping out?

Part III
Some Technical Considerations in Formulating Retention/Promotion Policy

Financial Costs

Each district should know how much grade retention is costing them. Compute the annual cost as follows

1. Multiply the total number of students retained in one year by the district's annual per pupil expenditure.

2. If retainees receive any additional services, e.g. remediation, add in these expenses.

Legal Matters

A district should be sensitive to the potential legal ramifications of its retention/promotion policy. The following questions should be taken under consideration.

1. What criteria are used to determine retention? Are multiple criteria used?

2. If test scores are used,

a) Are there set cut-off points or are individual judgments allowed?

b) Can you guarantee that the curriculum and classroom instruction cover the areas measured by the tests?

c) Are the tests reliable and valid?

d) If a test is used to determine graduation, do students have more than one chance to take the test?

e) If students fail these tests are they provided remediation?

3. Who is involved in the decision to retain: teachers, principals, parents, guidance counselors, students?

4. Has there been a recent radical change in the retention/promotion policy? If so, have you given students and parents adequate prior notice?

5. Is there a procedure whereby students and parents can challenge the school's decision?

6. When calculating your district's retention statistics did you find that a disproportionate number of minority students are retained?

Part IV
Transition Classes

An on-going evaluation should be instituted that looks at the effect of transition classes on children's academic and social progress, both short and long-term. Data should also be collected for transition-room eligible students who were promoted. Districts should think about the following issues

1. Have you reflected on the criteria and process for selection?

2. Are you aware of the cost and legal ramifications?

3. Do you collect data regarding the numbers and characteristics of transition room students?

4. Have you carefully defined the treatment or model used?

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